An Accountability Framework for British Columbia's Public Post-Secondary Education System

Ministry of Advanced Education
November 6, 2003

BRITISH COLUMBIA
Ministry of Advanced Education

106-0 5648 /

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction 1

The Accountability Framework Components 3

- **Goals and Objectives** 3
- **Roles and Responsibilities** 3
- **Performance Measurement** 4
- **Reporting** 5
- **Performance-Based Implications** 6
- **Evaluation and Review of the Framework** 6

Managing the Accountability Framework 8

INTRODUCTION

The accountability framework is a set of planning and reporting processes for British Columbia's public post-secondary system. Under the accountability framework, a number of existing planning and reporting activities conducted by the Ministry of Advanced Education and the province's public post-secondary institutions will be streamlined and harmonized within an annual cycle.

The purpose of the accountability framework is twofold: to benefit students by ensuring they receive quality education and educational opportunities relevant to their needs and the needs of the labour market, and to benefit all residents of the province by ensuring the public post-secondary system's ongoing contribution to social and economic development.

The accountability framework will achieve its purpose by enhancing system-level management of the public post-secondary system. This will involve:

- Promoting a stronger system context so post-secondary partners are encouraged to view institutions as interdependent parts of a coherent system;
- Improving coordination of planning to better align the goals and objectives of individual institutions with those of the system;
- Developing performance measures and targets to assess the effectiveness of plans and strategies in achieving goals and objectives; and,
- Ensuring that system partners understand the outcomes each is expected to achieve.

While the accountability framework will produce greater coherence and integration within the public post-secondary system, it will not produce institutional homogeneity. A system of differentiated mandates is consistent with system integration. Under the accountability framework, institutions will have the flexibility and autonomy to offer the programs and services their communities need while simultaneously working toward the broader strategic goals that government identifies for the system.

As outlined in the Ministry's current service plan, government has identified two strategic goals for the public post-secondary education system:

1. *A Top-Notch Education System*: to provide students with an accessible, affordable, high-quality and relevant post-secondary education.

2. *Economic And Social Development*: to provide students with the skills and knowledge for the workforce and the economy, and to respond to critical shortages in the labour market.

The accountability framework was developed following a commitment made by the Ministry in its 2002/03 – 2004/05 Service Plan. Throughout 2002, the Ministry consulted

... /2

with a wide range of groups within the system on how to best meet this commitment. In December 2002, a discussion paper based on these initial consultations was circulated among public institutions. A summary version of the paper was also posted on the Ministry's web site with an invitation for public comment. The feedback received on the discussion paper has informed the current structure of the framework. In the future, the accountability framework will continue to evolve through ongoing evaluation and review.

The next section of this document describes the main elements of the accountability framework. Three key features of the accountability framework should be pointed out from the start.

The first of these features is the accountability framework's use of performance measures to gauge progress toward achieving goals. Several performance measures assess whether students receive high-quality education that is relevant to their needs and to the needs of the labour market.

It is clear, however, that the post-secondary system provides benefits beyond those exclusively enjoyed by students and employers. For example, some institutions have mandates to conduct research, which benefits society in general through discovery, innovation and the creation of knowledge. While these contributions may be difficult to measure, they must nevertheless be recognized. Among the aspects of post-secondary research that do lend themselves to measurement are those with commercial and economic implications. These aspects form the basis of two of the initial performance measures. As the accountability framework evolves, additional measures concerning the benefits of research may be developed.

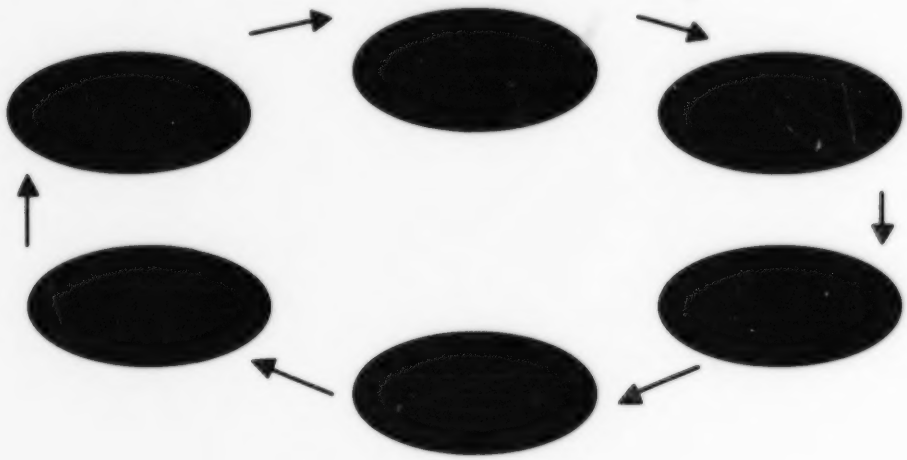
A second key feature of the accountability framework is a consistent, harmonized system of reporting. This will include publicly available annual reports describing the strategies undertaken to achieve goals and objectives, and the results of these activities. The Ministry will report on system-level activities and results, while each institution will report on its individual activities and results. These reports will inform students, system partners, and the public on achievements throughout the post-secondary education system.

A final key feature of the accountability framework is the emphasis it places on outcomes. Traditionally, accountability in the public sector has focused on compliance with statutory authority and adherence to appropriate financial management and accounting procedures. The accountability framework expands this focus by placing substantial emphasis on tracking outcomes to assess whether shared goals and objectives are achieved, whether public expenditures are effective and provide value, and whether publicly-funded organizations are performing well.

.../3

THE ACCOUNTABILITY FRAMEWORK COMPONENTS

The accountability framework consists of six inter-related components that together constitute an accountability cycle. The following diagram illustrates how the components are related.



Goals and Objectives

Goals indicate a strategic direction by describing desired outcomes. Objectives are the incremental, measurable results to be achieved as a means to accomplish goals.

Within the accountability framework, system-level goals and objectives will be established by the Ministry, with input from system partners. The goals and objectives established for the system will have clear linkages to both institutional goals and objectives, and government priorities.

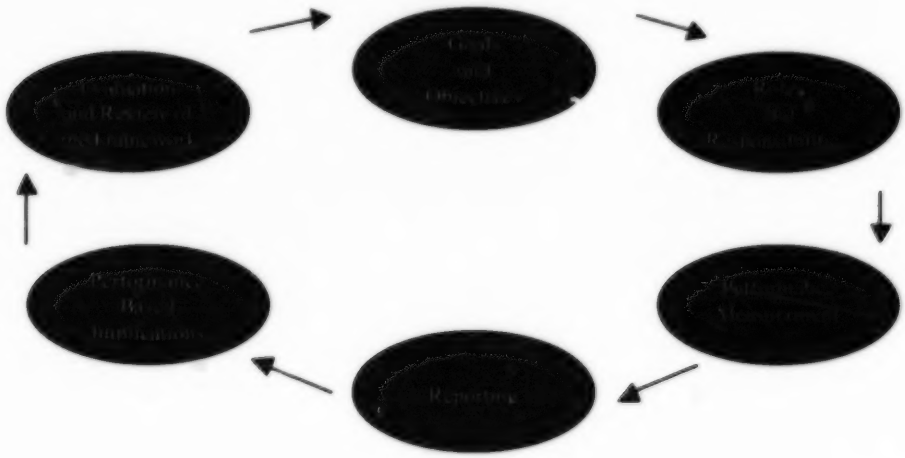
Roles and Responsibilities

The Ministry and institutions have distinct roles and responsibilities for which they are held accountable within the public post-secondary system.

../4

THE ACCOUNTABILITY FRAMEWORK COMPONENTS

The accountability framework consists of six inter-related components that together constitute an accountability cycle. The following diagram illustrates how the components are related.



Goals and Objectives

Goals indicate a strategic direction by describing desired outcomes. Objectives are the incremental, measurable results to be achieved as a means to accomplish goals.

Within the accountability framework, system-level goals and objectives will be established by the Ministry, with input from system partners. The goals and objectives established for the system will have clear linkages to both institutional goals and objectives, and government priorities.

Roles and Responsibilities

The Ministry and institutions have distinct roles and responsibilities for which they are held accountable within the public post-secondary system.

. . /4

Ministry Roles and Responsibilities

The Ministry provides leadership and policy direction and ensures accountability of the system. It has a lead role of working in partnership with institutions to foster the overall development of the post-secondary system.

The Ministry's roles and responsibilities are described in legislation and informed by government priorities. Under the *Budget Transparency and Accountability Act*, the Ministry must prepare an annual three-year service plan that describes the roles and responsibilities it will be held accountable for, and it must produce an annual service plan report describing the outcomes of the previous year's service plan. These plans and reports are public documents that are tabled in the Legislature and available on the Ministry web site.

Institution Roles and Responsibilities

Institutional roles and responsibilities, which vary from institution to institution, are identified in legislation and in annual budget and accountability letters from the Ministry. As autonomous entities, institutions are also accountable to their students, boards, and communities.

The accountability framework will affect institutional roles and responsibilities in two respects. First, budget and accountability letters will include targets for performance measures in addition to those currently identified for student enrolment. As has been the practice in the past, the letters will be informed by the Ministry's strategic direction with provision for institutional input in refining targets.

Second, the Ministry will work with institutions to ensure appropriate harmonization of government and institutional planning and reporting practices. Guidelines for preparing institutional service plans and reports will identify the essential elements to be included in plans and reports, such as an environmental scan, goals and objectives with appropriate linkages to system goals and objectives, and performance measures and targets. Beyond including the essential elements identified in the guidelines, institutions will be able to customize their plans and reports.

Performance Measurement

Performance measurement is the main focus of accountability within the accountability framework. Performance measures are developed through aligning goals and objectives with expected outcomes, identifying areas of performance interest, and finally formulating measures and targets. Performance targets typically involve achievement relative to a baseline.

.../5

Most of the framework's performance measures will emphasize outcomes to assess the effectiveness of strategies, to indicate whether public expenditures provide value, and to determine whether individual institutions and the system achieve identified goals and objectives. While the accountability framework will be increasingly outcomes-focused, it will also include other types of measures to provide a more comprehensive picture.

The first iteration of the accountability framework reflects the relevant performance measures identified in the Ministry's 2003/04 – 2005/06 Service Plan. These measures were developed and refined through consultation between the Ministry and system partners. Future adjustments will be developed in a similarly consultative manner.

For 2003/04, institutions will contribute toward reaching the system-level targets identified in the Ministry's Service Plan. Other than targets for student enrolment established in the 2003/04 budget and accountability letters, the first iteration of the accountability framework has not established targets for individual institutions. A process will be established, taking into account advice from the system, to identify institutional targets for 2004/05.

Effective performance measurement depends on efficient data collection and a coordinated, integrated system of data management. These methodological considerations, along with the technical definitions and details concerning performance data, are covered in the *Standards Manual for Accountability Framework Performance Measures*, which is a companion piece to the accountability framework.

It is recognized that while performance measurement can reveal a wide range of valuable information, it cannot be conducted using a "one-size-fits-all" approach. Interpretation of performance will require careful analysis and judgement of the different roles, mandates, strengths and challenges of each institution.

Reporting

Under the accountability framework, service plans will mark the beginning of an annual cycle, and service plan reports will mark the end. In this respect, plans and reports will serve as "bookends" of the process.

The Ministry's annual service plan report will serve as the system-level report, and each institution will prepare its own annual service plan report. Institution service plan reports will be submitted to both the Ministry and the Select Standing Committee on Education.

Reports at both levels will outline activities undertaken during the previous fiscal year toward achieving goals, and will describe any developments that may have emerged.

... /6

They will provide information for decision-makers both in the Ministry and institutions, and will be made available to the public. The reports will also provide information on how well government priorities are being met and of the value being obtained from public expenditures.

Performance-Based Implications

An integral part of the rationale for measuring performance is to provide decision-makers with information about areas where performance might be improved. The following are a few of the ways that performance information can be linked to decision-making to bring about improvement.

Public Reporting

Annual service plans and reports, for both the system and for each institution, will give students, stakeholders and the public an understanding of achievements in the public post-secondary system and the level of success attained by each institution. By providing stakeholders with more information on institutional activities, institutions and the Ministry can engage in informed discussions with interested parties about the direction of the public post-secondary system.

Reallocation

Resource allocation involves apportioning resources according to need as well as effectiveness. Performance reporting may help to reveal areas that are under resourced. The information gathered through annual reporting could assist the Ministry and institutions in reallocating scarce resources to areas of highest need.

Incentive Funding

The goal of incentive funding is to encourage improvements through a financial inducement. To be fair and effective, incentive funding should be incremental, direct, automatic, and formula-based. If or when such an approach is implemented within the accountability framework, it is expected that it would be phased in by "shadowing" for the first year to allow for review and refinement, and would likely be equivalent to a small percentage of operating grants depending on the availability of funds.

Evaluation and Review of the Framework

System partners will evaluate and review the accountability framework annually to assess its effectiveness. Evaluations and reviews will specifically gauge the utility and relevance of performance information and its contribution to the improvement and enhancement of the quality of students' education. The Advisory Committee will lead this review and will provide advice and recommendations on developing the framework.

.../7

Evaluation and review of the framework will potentially entail work at a number of levels, including:

- Determining the effectiveness of the framework in bringing about improvement in the public post-secondary system, including evaluating the appropriateness of the set of performance measures;
- Assessing the efficiency and effectiveness of the framework's components, processes and implementation; and,
- Reviewing linkages between the framework and other evaluation activities including institutional evaluation and program evaluation.

... /8

MANAGING THE ACCOUNTABILITY FRAMEWORK

The accountability framework will be informed by an executive-level Advisory Committee composed of Ministry and institution representatives. The Advisory Committee will provide input on implementation, address issues that may arise, and conduct the annual evaluation and review. Institutional membership will be structured to represent the sectors of the system: college, institute, university college, and university.

The Accountability Framework Performance Measures Working Group will provide advice on data and performance measures. The key document concerning the Working Group's activities will be the *Standards Manual for Accountability Framework Performance Measures*. The Working Group will review and refine the performance measures, conduct research on target information, link with institutional research activities, and identify best practices.

The following is a summary of the key documents and activities within a typical accountability cycle.

Ministry Service Plan
Activity will commence on preparing the Ministry's service plan in the fall. The service plan must be finalized in time to be tabled in the Legislature along with the provincial budget on the third Tuesday in February. The service plan will also be posted on the Ministry's web site. To prepare its service plan, the Ministry will:

- Review and revise environmental scanning information;
- Identify implications of government's strategic plan and work within government priorities;
- Discuss emerging system priorities; and
- Revisit strategic goals and objectives.

Budget and Accountability Letters
Budget and accountability letters will be prepared by the Ministry and sent to institutions shortly after the budget is tabled. Letters will also be posted on the Ministry's web site. To prepare the letters, the Ministry will:

- Assemble environmental scanning information;
- Identify components, requirements and targets with consideration of institutions' multi-year education plans;
- Draft letters, making sure government's strategic direction is reflected;
- Seek input from institutions and fine-tune letters;
- Meet with each institution (late fall); and,
- Finalize letters (February/March).

... /9

Institutional Service Plans
Each institution would build on its existing planning activities and would need to finalize the document by early spring once its budget and accountability letter has been received. Upon completion, each institution will submit its service plan to the Ministry and to the Select Standing Committee on Education, and make the information available publicly.

Ministry and Institutional Service Plan Reports
The Ministry and each institution will prepare annual service plan reports that provide an account of activities, developments and accomplishments of the previous fiscal year. The preparation of service plan reports will require the Ministry and institutions to collect, analyze, and interpret data on performance measures. Work on the Ministry service plan report commences in time to be completed by the end of June. It is assumed that institutions would likely follow a similar timeline.

Evaluation and review
At the end of each annual accountability framework cycle, the Advisory Committee will evaluate and review the operation of the framework.